

VU Research Portal

The social construction of revelation

Ganzevoort, R.R.

published in

International Journal of Practical Theology
2006

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1515/ijpt.2006.003](https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2006.003)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Ganzevoort, R. R. (2006). The social construction of revelation. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 8(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2006.003>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

The social construction of revelation

R.Ruard Ganzevoort

Appeared in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8/2, 2006, 1-14.

ABSTRACT

Working in a social constructionist perspective, this paper explores the potential of the concept of revelation in the many dialogues of practical theology: with the church, with society, and with the academic disciplines (theological and social-scientific). Each of these dialogues posits specific demands and constraints, and the practical theologian is to develop a consistent and communicative language of revelation. A dynamic understanding of transcendence and the distinction between inside-out and outside-in transcendence can help practical theologians frame the social construction of revelation and its relation to such phenomena as magic, sacralization, and desire. The paper intends to contribute to the development of public theology, in which a social constructionist perspective opens possibilities for significant conversations.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Offenbarung ist innerhalb der Theologie ein zentraler Begriff, der jedoch im Dialog zwischen Theologie und Sozialwissenschaften sowie zwischen Kirche und Gesellschaft das wechselseitige Verstehen oft erschwert oder verhindert. Sache der Praktischen Theologie ist es, Möglichkeiten zu erkunden, hier Sprachhilfe zu leisten. In diesem Artikel dient dem die Entwicklung eines dynamischen Transzendenzverständnisses. Mit Hilfe der Unterscheidung einer Transzendenz von außen nach innen und einer Transzendenz von innen nach außen wird die soziale Konstruktion von Offenbarungsmomenten in Phänomenen wie z.B. Magie, Sehnsucht oder Sakralisierung aufgezeigt. Mit diesem Ansatz liefert der Artikel einen Beitrag zur Entwicklung einer 'öffentlichen Theologie'

INTRODUCTION

Revelation is at the heart of religion, but it can also be a major impediment for developing public theology in the academy. These two observations provide a starting point for my efforts to develop practical theological discourse. There are of course strands of practical theology in which a straightforward reference to

revelation is accepted, often resulting in deductive or foundationalist approaches. Sometimes these references to revelation are sophisticated and well considered, as is the case in Gerrit Immink's recent Dutch introduction to practical theology.¹ Usually such a practical theology would be communicable within the religious community only. Even when performed on an academic level, this discourse runs the risk of isolation because the appeal to revelation implies a truth claim beyond the possibilities of verification and thereby a withdrawal from scientific argumentation. We might even call this sectarian because it hinders rather than advances wider communication. For public theology, such an approach is problematic.

It is no coincidence, then, that practical theologians have sought to enhance the academic reputation of the discipline by incorporating scientific methods and vocabularies from other disciplines, especially from the social sciences. Johannes Van der Ven's proposals for empirical theology should be noted here as important contributions.² There is, however, a dilemma in this development as well. Here practical theology takes a science of religion approach rather than a confessional one. Attractive as that may seem, we cannot avoid the language of revelation if we are to do justice to the self-understanding of the believing community; however, that language is not easily transformed into the vocabulary of social sciences. After all, translation is not replacing one word by another; it is speaking anew in a different discourse. Is such a translation possible for concepts like revelation? If so, what would it mean in the diverse approaches within practical theology?

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

In dealing with such issues, I have come to adopt a social constructionist perspective.³ One of the most important features of this perspective is that much attention is given to the influence of specific dialogues on possible meanings. The meaning of words does not exist outside of the conversations in which it functions. Social constructionism therefore moves beyond objectivism (meanings originating from the objective world) and subjectivism (meanings originating from the subjective psyche). Instead it focuses on the social and conversational origin and function of meanings.

¹ Gerrit Immink, *In God Geloven. Een Praktisch Theologische Reconstructie*, Zoetermeer (Meinema) 2003.

² Johannes van der Ven, *God Reinvented? A Theological Search in Texts and Tables*, Leiden (Brill) 1998. See also R. Ruud Ganzevoort, *Van der Ven's Empirical/Practical Theology and the Theological Encyclopaedia*, in: *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology. The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. Van der Ven*, eds. Chris Hermans / Mary Elizabeth Moore, Leiden (Brill) 2004, 53-74.

³ See Chris Hermans et al., *Social Constructionism and Theology*, Leiden (Brill) 2002; R. Ruud Ganzevoort, *What You See Is What You Get. Social Construction and Normativity*, in: *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology*, eds., Johannes A. van der Ven / Michael Scherer-Rath, Leiden (Brill) 2004, 17-33.

A useful example is to investigate the social construction of masculinity and falling in love. One can identify specific patterns of meaning and matching behaviors related to masculinity and love, differentiated for various age groups and cultures. What counts as falling in love is well defined, and the male Dutch working class heterosexual adolescent – to name one case I happen to see regularly – knows that specific feelings and acts are prescribed. This includes an active and somewhat aggressive attitude, a preference for frequent genital sex, derogatory talk about women in general, and uncertainty about ‘what the girl wants’. Even when this social construction is analyzed, however, my 19-year old son and his friends, portraying all these characteristics, are really and truly in love. Even more, they know that they are truly in love when they meet these standards. Social constructionism does not deny the reality of phenomena, but shifts attention from ontological to conversational interpretations.

For practical theological discourse about revelation, this means that we can (and in my view indeed should) take into account the various dialogues in which different sets of criteria function. We encounter other branches of theology and engage in conversations with the social sciences; we also connect with the church and the society. In all these conversations, practical theology takes on different meanings. Don Browning’s practical theology for example places the ethical conversation at the heart of practical theology and envisions a structurally different discipline from Johannes Van der Ven with his preference for the language of systematic theology.⁴ Herbert Haslinger and his associates have developed their handbook in the realm of a conversation with the Roman Catholic Church; thus, their approach is entirely different from the type of cultural Protestantism that Wilhelm Gräb builds in his conversation with culture and society.⁵ The conversation we partake in determines not only the themes that are relevant. It also defines the lines of reasoning, the validity of arguments, and the language to be used.

To speak of the social construction of revelation focuses our attention on the process of understanding our sensations or experiences as divine disclosure, instead of unquestionably postulating a divine origin. We need not reject the claim that God has revealed Him or Herself in a particular way, nor do we have to endorse it. In a social constructionist approach we try to bring such a claim into conversation by asking how it has evolved, how it functions in the relationship with God and with fellow humans, and how it can be evaluated, for example, in terms of truth, justice, and beauty. The language we use depends on the criteria that are important to the discourse at hand. In the realm of the church, one may

⁴ Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Minneapolis (Fortress) 1991. Johannes A. van der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1996.

⁵ Herbert Haslinger, Christiane Bundschuh-Schramm, Ottmar Fuchs, Leo Karrer, Stephanie Klein, Stefan Knobloch, and Gundelinde Stoltenberg, *Praktische Theologie. Grundlegungen*, Mainz (Matthias Grunewald) 1999; Wilhelm Gräb, *Sinn fürs Unendliche. Religion in der Mediengesellschaft*, Gütersloh (Kaiser) 2002.

employ religious language more easily. Dealing with social scientists we will accommodate our language to include their language and theories. This is not a matter of chameleonic adaptation, but a consequence of understanding that the meaning of the term is located in a conversation.

Obviously, if we are to engage in such diverse conversations, we will encounter conflicts of interpretation that we cannot accommodate. The practical theologian in that case faces the difficult task of maintaining his or her professional integrity while working in conflicting languages. This is, however, still primarily a professional conflict of languages and not necessarily a conflict between one's profession and one's personal beliefs. Our professional task is to push the limits of understanding (Gadamer's horizons) and facilitate meaningful exchanges.

A second, and related, aspect of a social constructionist perspective is its attention to the performative dimension of language. Instead of asking what revelation is, what content is revealed, and how we can evaluate competing claims of revelation, a social constructionist practical theology will ask what it means when someone invokes the language of revelation.

The performative meanings of revelation lie in the relational actions performed through this discourse. What do we accomplish relationally by invoking the language of revelation? It is not just a reference to an 'objective side of religion'; it is also acting toward an audience. Here we can benefit from Marcel Viau's interpretation of the object of discourse.⁶ He distinguishes between the object as the purpose of our discourse (performative) and the object as the denotation of discourse (referential). Whereas Gerrit Immink stresses the importance of the referential object, I focus more on the performative object. When we use the language of revelation, we construct a specific type of relationship between ourselves, our fellow believers, and God. This is a performative linguistic action that merits practical theological description, interpretation, and (eventually) evaluation. Our theological possibilities do not depend on the referential assumption of divine action in revelation; they are more than adequate in understanding the performative actions of religion.

To speak of the social construction of revelation is to focus on the human side of the interpretive process of understanding our sensations or experiences as divine disclosure. As I intend to show, this approach evades reductionism and includes the important language of revelation and transcendence. In transcending phenomena we encounter revelatory moments, and – I will claim – the social constructions we build are necessary for revelation to occur.

I do not use the term transcendence in a static manner as if we were describing how different God is from us: beyond our knowledge, language, moral standards, and finally beyond our mode of existence. Instead, I use the term to describe the dynamics of human life, constantly surpassing the boundaries of their existing life-worlds. Sometimes these boundaries are crossed from the outside inward. This is

⁶ Marcel Viau, *Practical theology. A New Approach*, Leiden (Brill) 1999.

what we usually call revelation, but it is not limited to the realm of religion. Every time we are addressed, our boundaries are crossed or transcended. This is sometimes life-giving, but it can be devastating when the boundaries are crossed to do us harm. A movement also takes place from the inside outward; in this movement too, we actively transcend ourselves. We surpass our boundaries socially, existentially, and religiously. In transcending ourselves as individuals and as communities, we direct ourselves to another 'reality'. This other reality becomes present in our world. In our discourse we act performatively toward humans and the divine and bring transcending elements to our communications. Through performative acts we bring about divine actions. It is to this transcending movement that I want to turn now and explore how it contributes to the socially constructed experience of revelation. I will address briefly the cases of magic, sacralization, and desire.

MAGIC, SACRALIZATION, DESIRE

The phenomena of magic, sacralization, and desire belong to the complex interpretive processes associated with revelation and contributing to transcendence, as described in this essay. Focusing on these three phenomena can disclose some of the intricacies of my argument.

Magic

Let me start with magic. Theologians and social scientists alike have tried to demarcate religion and magic, seeing magic and revelation as contradictory. Magic came to be defined by automatic processes, religion by receptivity for divine interventions. In magic humans control access to the religious goods; in religion they live in expectancy toward God. Magic then has usually been regarded as primitive, compared to the more 'rational' religion, especially the Christian one. Others, especially sociologists of religion like Emile Durkheim, have distinguished magic from religion by their location, religion being social and institutionalized and magic referring to individual artifacts.

These distinctions seem less persuasive today. In a way unimagined by theologians or social scientists in the era of modernity, magic has returned to the scene of religion in everyday life.⁷ Reconsidering the evidence, the present and past praxis of the church and also its 'classics' (David Tracy) are ambivalent, containing many magical elements together with a critique of magic. Notable examples are found in certain forms of sacramentalization and in mantra-like songs of the Pentecostal tradition. The *ex opere operato* view of sacraments comes close to magic when the realization of the promise of Christ is made dependent on correct performance. To be true, there is a difference between an ecclesiastically calibrated theology of sacraments and the more magical meanings attributed to these sacraments. Protestantism, with its adamant resistance to magic and its focus on the Word and

⁷ Hans-Günter Heimbrock / Heinz Streib, *Magie. Katastrophenreligion und Kritik des Glaubens*, Kampen (Kok) 1994.

the sovereignty of God, has its own magical approaches, however, as an oracle-like handling of the Bible.

Magic may be properly understood as inside-out transcendence. Through magical performances, individuals and groups attempt to move beyond the boundaries of human existence – the limits of reality, of life itself, of our capacities, and of our sensory perceptions. In this transcendent movement, God and/or the universe (or however these are phrased) are plied with the purpose of bringing about some action or communication. Magic serves as a way to experience divine disclosure. It has distinct performative features in that it evokes revelation from the deity.

Sacralization

A second form of inside-out transcendence is sacralization. Jacques Ellul has given a provocative account of how the gospel came to be perverted in the history of Christianity. He devotes an important chapter to the process of desacralization through Christianity and the sacralization of Christianity.⁸ Every society has a sphere of experiences, objects, rites, and words that are not definable in purely utilitarian terms, not reducible to rationality, and not controllable by humans. This sacred sphere is broader than religion and focuses on at least three aspects of human life: time, space, and relationship. Ellul points out that Jewish and Christian thought have fiercely opposed the sacred universe of pagan religions. The notion of creation, for example, implies the desacralization of the cosmos.

Christianity itself came to be sacralized, however, partly because of the influence of pagan religions still operant in the lives of many converts in the early centuries. Some places (church buildings), times (Sundays), and persons (priests) were acknowledged as (more) sacred than others. Soon, particular gestures, words, and attire were needed to participate in these sacralized shapes of Christianity. It is intriguing to read historical and contemporary Reform movements as efforts in desacralization, but immediately we will find that all these movements fell prey to the precise sacralization that they have contested. Jacques Ellul concludes that human existence seems almost impossible without the sacred and that this active force seduces humankind time and again to create or construct a sacred universe without which we would not know how to exist in the universe in which we were created. This paradoxical conclusion understands the sacred as preceding human existence, but also resulting from human creations.

Ellul's conclusion seems akin to Geertz's famous functional definition of religion where he includes "conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."⁹ The sacred is a common denominator in such functional

⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The subversion of Christianity*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1986, 52-86. Original: *La Subversion du Christianisme*, Paris (Seuil) 1984. Transl. Geoffrey W. Bromiley.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, *Religion as a Cultural System*. In: *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton, London (Tavistock) 1966, p. 4

definitions, typically interpreted as a product (and inspirer) of human culture.¹⁰ The construction of the sacred can thus be understood with the three movements that Berger & Luckmann distinguished: externalizing human constructions; objectifying these constructions in such a way that they are not recognized as human products but as structures preceding our constructions; and finally internalizing the constructions.¹¹

For our understanding of inside-out transcendence, the construction of the sacred in the process of sacralization highlights the way humankind transcends itself and its life-world by loading certain items (places, times, persons) with symbolic meaning. These items then are no longer just what they used to be. Instead, they become references to another (divine) realm, or even manifestations of that realm. In this process, the sacralized items gain revelatory power in that they represent and thus bring into presence the divine.

One important example is found in personal charisma. Religious Studies scholar Jack Sanders brings the results of studying charismatic religious leaders like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh to the study of Jesus as the charismatic leader of a new religious movement. Following Max Weber, Sanders describes charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”¹² Charismatic leadership is usually characterized by specific (divine) calling, attracting loyal followers and fierce opponents, and the introduction of a radically new teaching that is incompatible to the status quo. For a charismatic leader to be successful, some sense of crisis is necessary. The style of the charismatic leader typically is defined by randomness. Unpredictability, inconsistency, and massive changes prevent the routinization of charisma, provide the aura of ‘otherness’, and make sure that the followers are not so much devoted to the message but to the messenger. Sanders claims that all these features are recognizable, not only for Rajneesh, but also for Jesus. It is precisely the ‘otherness’, randomness, and lack of conventionality that create the possibility of sacralization. The dedication to this one outsider, projecting upon him or her all kinds of desires and frustrations, turns the outsider into the vicarious voice of the people. The sacralized person – construed through these projections and his well-orchestrated self-presentation – becomes the representative of an ultimate truth.

Desire

The third form of inside-out transcendence is desire. The concept of desire or the phenomena understood as desire usually involve descriptions in volitional terms like want, wish, inspiration, and intention. Complementary to this are affectional

¹⁰ See Manfred Josuttis, *Einführung in das Heilige*, Gütersloh (Kaiser) 1996.

¹¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality. A treatise on the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, New York (Anchor Books) 1966.

¹² Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors. Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity*, London (SCMP) 2000, p. 22.

descriptions like passion, eroticism, yearning, and lust. Volition regards the direction inherent to the dynamic force of desire, because desire is always desire for something or someone. It implies movement in a certain direction. Affection points to the strength of a person's or group's involvement in the movement of desire.

Albert Ploeger, taking desire as *leitmotiv* in his parishioner-oriented practical theology, defines desire as an anthropological category: "The mental capacity of desire is strength of mind that resists suffering. It is the ineffable and dynamic positively oriented desire for 'insight into the origin of life', stemming from deficiency and suffering. Desire is for insight, into myself, into humankind, and into the world around me; into present-day security, justice, love, beauty, and delight; and into fulfillment in the future."¹³ Although conceptually a rather loose definition, Ploeger helps identify some key features. Desire is related to suffering, insight, and fulfillment, encompassing past, present, and future. This anthropological approach facilitates an inclusive treatment, overcoming narrowly defined confessional descriptions. It is only in a second step that Ploeger speaks of substantively filled – Christian – desire that emerges from the encounter of general desire and a spiritual offer from the Christian tradition.

For the understanding of desire as inside-out transcendence, Ploeger's definition of desire as human mental capacity is meaningful. It denotes the force of movement that resists acquiescence or satisfaction with the actual situation or experience. Instead of just asking 'what is?', desire deals with 'what if?' This makes desire the dynamic impetus for potentiality next to actuality, hope next to resignation, passion next to passivity. Desire transcends the boundaries of our lives.

Several dimensions of desire merit specific attention in practical theology. At this point I will only mention temporal and relational desire, that is, hope and lust. Temporal desire or hope refers to the time limits of our existence. Charles Gerkin has pictured contemporary consciousness in Western society as: "the image of life as caught between infinite aspirations, on the one hand, and the boundaries of finitude, on the other." He adds that "the self-transcendence of the present self is not only continuously re-imaging its past, but is also continuously presented with the necessity of pre-imaging and pre-structuring its future self and experience. Our biographies of the future are also being continuously rewritten."¹⁴ Relational desire can come in many forms, including lust, love, and friendship. It is the socially constructed yearning to cross boundaries that mark the difference between self and other. Lust, for example, is the self-transcending effort to encapsulate the other within the self and to surrender the self to the other. This aggressive dimension of lust needs to be balanced by respect for the alterity of the

¹³ Albert Ploeger / Joke Ploeger-Grotegoed, *De Gemeente en Haar Verlangen*, Kampen (Kok) 2001, p. 50. Translation of quotation by the present author.

¹⁴ Charles Gerkin, *Crisis Experience in Modern Life. Theory and Theology in Pastoral Care*, Nashville (Abingdon) 1979, p. 20, 56.

other, understanding that the mystery of the other can never be conquered, but only received. In other words, the self-transcendent dynamics of lust are dialectically connected to the evasive other.

Self-transcendence and Revelation

Magic, sacralization, and desire are interpreted here as self-transcending longings and actions. They are not necessarily framed religiously, and one runs the risk of self-deceptive colonialism if God is too easily inserted as the ultimate to which our desire reaches out. Still, though hesitant to Christianize magic, sacralization, and desire, we may understand them as self-transcending instances of revelation. Their implicit ultimate object marks the revelatory nature of our magic, sacralization, and desire. In other words, the direction our actions and longings take functions as a revelation of what we long for. The object of our desire is already present in the desire itself. In the language of a social constructionist approach presented above, the object of our discourses (magical, sacralizing, desiring) is a performative object, not a referential one.

The self-transcending dynamics in the phenomena mentioned have a revelatory power in that the objects referred to are made present. Through magical actions, a symbolic realm of meaning is entered where experiences can be constructed as divine disclosure. Through sacralization, places, times, and persons are constructed as sacred and granted the possibility to become manifestations of the divine, thereby creating a second, sacred universe. Through desire, what we hope for in the future becomes part of our present self, directing us in a certain way and coloring our experience and our identity. When we long for another person, that person becomes present in our experiences. Thus, I may say about my lover: 'He is always in my heart'.

REVELATION AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY

What do we gain by conceptualizing revelation and transcendence in such a social constructivist way, stressing human artifacts and desires? What do we lose? For me, working in Western Europe, the benefit is that it helps me communicate my theological enterprise to the world outside the church and the theological institutes. As a scholar, I do not wish to be confined to the confessional discourse of a shrinking religious community. This is more than a pragmatic move. We live in a time of the de-institutionalization of religion, not of secularization. This is true for many parts of the world, boosted by the impulses of globalization and resulting in a still-present or resurging folk religion as well, as in the world of mass media, commerce, and popular culture. This is at least the case in the part of the world where I live, and it is certainly true in my own life. We live in a world of wild, unorganized devotion, and of haphazard efforts by religious institutions to tame these devotions.

As a theologian, I am interested in the wild devotions and the processes of taming them. Perhaps our greatest challenge lies in investigating the exchanges between formalized traditions and other expressions of transcendence. I do not think that

it is the primary task of the theologian to reiterate, restore, or update an outlived tradition, though some theologians will be needed to do just that. More of us are required to explore and interpret how humans live their lives of hope and misery, magic and cynicism, love and violence. We need to learn to understand how they transcend themselves in their longings and their dreams and how they relate to whatever they call or do not call God. These are people whom we encounter inside and outside the church. What is needed is the enhancement of communication between these groups, between their competing worldviews, or better still, between the fragments of religion that emerge in diverse times and places.¹⁵ We need more conversation. The perspective of social constructionism applied to transcendence and revelation offers a language to do just this. It does not guarantee that we will understand one another or that conflicts will be solved. When believers speak their language of revelation, all we can do is foster the communication of its intentions through theological craftsmanship, thereby contributing to a salutary religious interaction in a tense world.

For me, public theology is not only theology with an open eye for the needs of this world.¹⁶ It is more than theology willing to engage in the troublesome issues of public debate, and it is different from a theology that seeks to demonstrate the value of the Christian worldview for this debate. I see public theology as the sharing of our methodical expertise and our knowledge of spirituality, meaning, transcendence, and religious life. This type of public theology can be brought to the task of hermeneutical analysis of public phenomena, such as popular culture or the biographies of traumatized men.¹⁷ Theologians working on public theology of this kind bring their methodical expertise to the task of understanding the world in which we live.

The normative dimension of the theologian's task, as described here, is a secondary one. Our primary task is to illuminate and facilitate communication and exchange between discourses. In these exchanges, many normative issues arise and the various partners in dialogue bring their values and truth claims. Revelation is one way of expressing this; scientific discovery is another, often equally buttressed, position. We intend to deepen this normative dimension in our theological efforts to support the conversation. In the end, we cannot do this from an observer's point of view only. We join the conversation and offer our own understanding of what has been disclosed to us, but, as professional theologians, we might better refrain from claiming revealed truths as objective

¹⁵ Henning Luther, *Religion und Alltag. Bausteine zu Einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*, Stuttgart (Im Radius Verlag) 1992.

¹⁶ Duncan Forrester, *Truthful Action*, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 2002.

¹⁷ Gräb (n 5); Elaine Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human. Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, Manchester (Manchester University Press) 2002; Jörg Herrmann, *Sinnmaschine Kino. Sinndeutung und Religion in Populären Film*, Gütersloh (Kaiser) 2002; Ruurd Ganzevoort, *Reconstructies. Praktisch-theologisch Onderzoek naar de Verhalen van Mannen over Seksueel Misbruik en Geloof* [Reconstructions. Practical Theological Inquiry into the Stories of Men about Sexual Abuse and Religion], Kampen (Kok) 2001.

and universally normative if we want to remain in the position of fostering communication.

THEOLOGICAL CASE

Let me present one brief case study of how we can read and interpret theological material in our world. I present this case reluctantly because it easily risks the criticism that I relapse into a model of application, moving from theory to practice. In this paper, focusing on the level of theory, the case is indeed an illustration, but the content of the example will prove to be an independent contributor to new theory and an independent voice in our conversations.

The case deals with revelation and popular cinema.¹⁸ The 1998 movie *The Truman Show* is a Hollywood-critique of the media-ridden world in which the *homo commercialis* lives. The film grossed over 250 million U.S. dollars in a few months and received several awards, including three Golden Globes and three Oscar nominations. In this picture, Truman Burbank lives in a make-believe world, televised continuously from the day of his birth. He is adopted by a major company and unknowingly surrounded by actors and product placements. When he is about 30 years old, he becomes aware of the cracks in his world and endeavors a journey to the exit. *The Truman Show* uses mythical, almost archetypical, material like a storm on the lake, walking on water, dreaming of paradise, and the posture of crucifixion. This material from religious myths is recycled in the world of mass consumption and mass media. Tru(e)man is Everyman, named after the city of Burbank, California, where major media companies like Disney, Warner, and NBC are based. In this picture, the religious imagery no longer refers to organized religious traditions. Instead it contributes to the analysis and critique of the world of the media. In other words, it aims at unmasking the ‘gods’ of media-religion.

The Truman Show contains several stories about humans and – admittedly more implicit – stories about God. For starters, one discovers the story of humans as explorers, setting out to discover the world and beyond. In Truman’s case, the explorer immediately encounters obstacles and boundaries, only to be overcome after a life-and-death struggle with his Maker, TV-director Christof. This story is explicit about how we are in the grasp of the media, exploited for commercial reasons. In the end, however, Christof’s world depends on Truman as much as Truman’s world is created by Christof. This is not an easy Feuerbachian projection theology, but a theological analysis of the mutual dependence of humans and their gods.

¹⁸ Ruard Ganzevoort / Helga Knecht, “Nothing is Fake...It’s Merely Controlled”. The Truman Show als Theologisch Materiaal [The Truman Show as Theological Material], in: Theologisch Debat 1:2, 2004, 39-45.

Second, the movie is a story of authenticity. The opening sequence of the movie speaks of the genuine nature of Truman: “There is nothing fake about Truman himself.” This is what viewers enjoy and what is the basis for major projects like *Big Brother*. The problem is, of course, whether we could still speak of authenticity when every experience is preformatted. The movie portrays human lives, and particularly leisure time, as programmed in such a way that every one of us will gain the same authentic experience. This is not only the case in the world of commerce, but it can also be recognized in the world of religion. Conversion, rituals, and religious experiences are as authentic as they are standardized.¹⁹ *The Truman Story* of authentic humanity is a story of resistance. The film shows that the true self cannot be portrayed. Even Truman’s ‘conversion’ is shown only indirectly, and in the end Truman states: “you never had a camera in my head.”

Third, this is a story of humans as voyeurs. At several points in the movie we see the viewers of Truman on TV. These viewers present an extra layer of meanings in the movie, as they embody an intimate relationship to Truman. For some of them, Truman takes on messianic proportions, although there is more than a hint of escapism in their love for Truman. The film shows how the viewers’ emotions are orchestrated by Christof, showing how their world – like Truman’s – depends on the Director. It is no coincidence then that, among all the viewers, one sees father. This is a fatherless world in which the director is Father. Intriguingly, at the end of the movie, this fatherless world is the only one to remain. With Truman leaving the scene, both his and Christof’s worlds disappear (“cease transmission”). Unfortunately, after this liberation, the viewers simply switch channels.

These three stories are powerful portrayals of humankind in our times. They offer a critique of the media-culture in which we live, even though the final suggestion is that we will not be able to liberate ourselves from this culture. The religious material used in this critique serves to unmask the quasi-divine power of commercial media.

Without being too far-fetched, one can interpret *The Truman Show* as revelatory. The movie aims at disclosing media strategies, summoning us viewers to be authentic, and inviting us to break free. The concept of revelation is useful in the analysis of both *The Truman Show* and the commercial culture it challenges. For Truman himself, the discovery that his world is make-believe is a revelation of Platonic (or biblical) proportions. For the viewers in the movie, the world Christof shows them is like a story of paradise, comforting them in their ordinary lives. Witnessing Truman’s journey functions as a revelation of truth confronting them in their voyeurism, and although they sustain Truman in his quest, this experience does not affect their own lives. The employment of Hollywood techniques has been needed to confront the Hollywood deceptions; however, the use of these techniques has created a situation in which the movie becomes part

¹⁹ See the example of research into glossolalia in Nils Holm, Sundén’s Role Theory and Glossolalia, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26:3, 1987, 383-389.

of the scheme. For us as viewers of the movie, the disclosure of Hollywood strategies reveals the true nature of our life-world and demands a faithful response. The degree to which we experience this as revelation depends on the dynamics of transcendence.

The Truman Show offers important material for public theology. As a theologian working in this world, I endeavor to acknowledge, understand, and evaluate the God-talk of our times, also the God-talk implicit in movies like this. Our contribution to this world can be our expertise in myths, symbols, rituals, and issues of existential and transcending meanings. This expertise can be brought to the task of understanding and sometimes changing the complex world in which we live. The makers of this movie have acted as sophisticated theologians, offering a rich story of the gods and idols of our world.

This story is not without critical impact on Christianity and other religious traditions. The 'truth' disclosed is that our religious stories and systems may be as illusory and compulsory as the world in which Truman lives. *The Truman Show* reveals the extent of self-deception in human life. If we take this critique seriously, we have to consider that our liturgies and rituals offer the same kind of preformatted authentic experiences. We also come to see that the myths of our religions structure our world inasmuch as they limit our freedom. Religious stories always have this double capacity: disclosure of "knowledge" is always closure of other options. All of this is symbolized in the movie viewers' relation with Christof, as it is also symbolized in the God images by which we live. In the end, both our religions and the Truman show are stories that try to make sense of the complex globalized and commercialized world, but the stories are not easily harmonized.

CONCLUSION

This paper is not a plea for a public theology without content or without tradition. I myself stand in the Christian tradition and, thanks to the social constructions of centuries, I am able to experience moments of disclosure, moments of divine revelation. In worship and prayer I address this God I have come to know and love. These are the performative actions that constitute my life as a believer. They are different yet related to other moments of revelation in religious and non-religious settings. I consider that my task is to bring these actions, experiences and theological reflections into dialogue with the world around me. That is why I try to open up the religious language of revelation, transcendence, and all the other theological concepts. My aim is to make the wisdom inherent to these concepts available for a new world, allowing new constructions to be made. In my dreams, this will be God's world and therefore a world given to humans, not to Christians alone. For these reasons, I focus on theological craftsmanship rather than on the beliefs of the theologian.

The challenge for the theologian, and maybe for the church, is to discover how we can connect the explicit language of Christian faith and the implicit language

of secular or religion-like expressions. These two cannot be reduced to one another, but neither can they be separated. They represent different discourses with different questions, criteria, and possibilities. We need to become fluent in both languages, which unavoidably will mean that we will never be completely at home in either.

To put it differently, one does have something to lose by taking such a perspective. We leave behind the idea that we can identify some objective truth. We mourn or enjoy the loss of an ultimate and absolute certainty. We renounce the claim that we can grasp intellectually the world in which we live or the God with whom we live. I lost all of those securities a long time ago. What is left is the language of love, surrendering to the mercy of the unknown, to fragments of beauty, joy, justice, and tenderness. What is left – in short – is faith.